

## Truth and the Vietnam papers

IN all the shouting over the Pentagon papers on U.S. involvement in Vietnam, one major point is being overlooked: Just how good a study is it?

The question is important because politicians are already seizing on bits and pieces of the leaked papers to "prove" this or that self-serving assertion.

The other day, for example, Kansas Sen. Robert Dole, Republican national chairman, charged that the papers showed "eight years of deception and escalation" by the Democrats. And Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield hit such "sniffing" at the report "for political profit."

One danger, we think, is that the public may be misled into thinking that a definitive history of the Vietnam war has been disclosed. This could only help those political lynching parties now trying to hang the rope of Vietnam around their opponents' necks.

Fortunately for the cause of fair play, a good appraisal of the Pentagon study exists. It was written by Leslie H. Gelb, the former government official who headed the task force that produced the 43-volume history.

With commendable objectivity, Mr. Gelb makes clear the project's shortcomings, deficiencies and handicaps. He notes that his team had complete access to Defense Department papers, only limited access to State Department and CIA material, and no access to files in the White House, where final decisions were made. Nor could his men interview top officials.

"The result," writes Mr. Gelb, "was not so much a documentary history, as a history based solely on documents . . . Pieces of paper, formidable and suggestive by themselves, could have meant much or nothing.

"Perhaps this document was never sent anywhere, and perhaps that one . . . was irrelevant. Without the memories of people to tell us, we were certain to make mistakes . . . This approach to research was bound to lead to distortions and distortions we are sure abound in these studies."

His staff, Mr. Gelb continues, was "superb — uniformly bright and interested." He concedes they were "not always versed in the art of research," and adds:

"Of course, we all had our prejudices and axes to grind and these shine thru clearly at times, but we tried, we think, to suppress or compensate for them."

Also, Mr. Gelb recalls, his men came from the armed forces, the State Department, the "think tanks" and were constantly being yanked back by their superiors before they could finish their work.

"Almost all the studies had several authors, each heir dutifully trying to pick up the threads of his predecessor," he says.

In his conclusion, Mr. Gelb states:

"Writing history, especially where it blends into current events, especially where that current event is Vietnam, is a treacherous exercise."

Amen.